Barak Quits Israel's Labor Party

By CHARLES LEVINSON

JERUSALEM—Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak announced Monday that he was leaving the center-left Labor Party, casting clouds over the stability of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and the prospects of restarting the peace process.

Mr. Barak said Monday he is forming a new, more centrist Independence Party, which will include four breakaway Labor Party lawmakers in addition to himself. Mr. Barak's new party will remain in Mr. Netanyahu's coalition.

The announcement marks a key moment in the remaking—or further unraveling—of Labor, the party of Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, and of the slain prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, which was most affiliated with advocating peace with Israel's enemies. Labor’s influence has waned in the past decade following Mr. Barak's failed bid as Prime Minister to negotiate peace with the Palestinians in 2000 and the ensuing outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising.

Labor won an all-time low 13 out of 120 seats in 2009 parliamentary elections, and its lawmakers were the only left-leaning member of Mr. Netanyahu's governing coalition, a group otherwise made up of nationalist and religious parties.

The shakeup to Labor wasn’t unexpected. For months, Labor lawmakers had grown impatient with the lack of progress on the peace process and blamed Mr. Barak for not doing enough to pressure Mr. Netanyahu to make concessions to the Palestinians.

But Mr. Barak—a former special-forces commander with a reputation for being a farsighted strategist who brings military-like precision to his politics—appeared to have outflanked the party of Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, and of the slain prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, which was most affiliated with advocating peace with Israel’s enemies. Labor’s influence has waned in the past decade following Mr. Barak’s failed bid as Prime Minister to negotiate peace with the Palestinians in 2000 and the ensuing outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising.

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In response to Mr. Barak’s move, three Labor lawmakers, all ministers, announced Monday they were withdrawing from Mr. Netanyahu’s government. The remaining five Labor lawmakers in the government are expected to follow suit but haven’t yet made an official announcement.

The likely loss of those eight Labor lawmakers would leave Mr. Netanyahu with a smaller but more ideologically cohesive coalition of 66 seats in Israel’s 120-seat legislature.

Mr. Netanyahu said his “government has grown much stronger” after the departure of lawmakers who had long been threatening to force the entire Labor party out of the government. That would have been far more destabilizing for Mr. Netanyahu: Mr. Barak’s...
presence and authority as military leader representing the center left appears to be a top political priority for Mr. Netanyahu.

Mr. Netanyahu said the public dissent from within his coalition by the departing Labor lawmakers had given the Palestinians false hope that if they avoided peace negotiations, Mr. Netanyahu's government might fall.

"The whole world knows, and the Palestinians know, that this government will be around for the next few years and that it is with this government that they should negotiate for peace," Mr. Netanyahu said after Mr. Barak's announcement.

In his announcement Monday morning, Mr. Barak cited "endless fighting within the party" especially from a large faction of lawmakers that was uncomfortable with his ongoing alliance with Mr. Netanyahu and other rightist parties.

In recent months, the infighting and paralysis within the Labor Party had become so bad, one party official said, that Mr. Barak was even blocked from approving cosmetic changes to the party's Web site.

Some analysts and party officials said Mr. Barak's move and the departure of the Labor party signaled that parties had already begun positioning themselves for new elections in Israel, which in itself would have a destabilizing impact on Mr. Netanyahu's government.

Tzippi Livni, leader of the opposition centrist Kadima Party, seized on Mr. Barak's move to stake her claim as the sole remaining opposition leader in Israel. She had competed with Mr. Barak for votes from the center-left in 2009, but by abandoning Labor, Mr. Barak had cast his lot firmly with Mr. Netanyahu, she said.

"The Netanyahu government is a narrow government crumbling from the inside," she said.

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